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ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that the audience influences one's self-presentation. Research has described the person sensitive to the public aspects of behavior to be in a state of public self-awareness. This construct of public self-consciousness was examined in relation to the individual's self-presentations to several different audiences. A median split of the Public Self-Consciousness subscale divided female undergraduates into high (N=50) and low (N=48) public groups. All subjects completed a self-concept measure, rating themselves on 20 bipolar adjectives representing general personality factors, and then used the same 20 adjective items to describe their actions in the presence of 5 persons (mother, best female friend, best male friend, a disliked person, and a professor). Results showed that high public subjects were more variable than low public subjects in their self-reported behaviors across the different audiences and showed greater discrepancy between their general self-image and specific self-presentations. The findings support the validity of the public self-consciousness construct. (NRB)

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Variability in Self-Presentations to Others: The Effect of Public Self-Consciousness*

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Abstract

Subjects high and low on public self-consciousness described first how they generally are and then how they act in the presence of five known persons. High public subjects were more variable in their self-reported behaviors across the different audiences and showed greater discrepancy between their general self-image and specific self-presentations.

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Variability in Self-Presentations to Others:

The Effect of Public Self-Consciousness

The idea that the audience influences one's self-presentation can be traced at least as far back as 1890 to William James. He wrote that the individual has as many selves as there are persons who know him, and that to each of these persons he shows a "different side of himself" (p. 294). Over the past century other students of interpersonal processes have noted the many "different sides" of individuals (Mead, 1934; Rogers, 1959; Goffman, 1959; Snyder, 1979). This paper examines in particular Buss's (1980) construct of public self-consciousness in relation to the individual's self-presentations to several different audiences.

When sensitive to the public aspects of his or her behavior, a person is said to be in a state of public self-awareness (Buss, 1980). Individuals can be made aware of themselves as social objects by exposing them to an unfamiliar audience, a televisioncamera or large mirror, or by providing them with feedback from audiovisual recordings. Although a state of public self-awareness may be induced in any person, individuals differ in how dispositionally concerned they are about the impressions they make on others. "Public self-consciousness," the dispositional version of public self-awareness, is assessed by a 7-item scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975); a sample item is, "I'm concerned about the way I present myself." Persons who score high on the scale are not only merely concerned about the impressions they leave on others, they are apparently more accurate in predicting the actual impressions left. Tobey and Tunnell (in press) showed that female subjects scoring high on public self-consciousness were significantly more accurate than low-scoring subjects in predicting the impressions they would make when a 4-minute videotape of themselves was played to an unfamiliar audience. The greater accuracy occurred even though high public self-consciousness subjects showed more apprehension about being videotaped, and the fact that the

actual impressions created by high-scoring subjects were no different from those created by low-scoring subjects.

The notion of a public self is quite different from the traditional self-concept, which is defined as how the individual views himself or herself. Moreover, most self-report rating scales of personality presumedly assess the traditional self-concept. [Neither does Buss's other major construct, private self-consciousness, correspond to the traditional self-concept. Private self-consciousness refers to an enduring focus of attention on private thoughts, feelings and motives.] On traditional self-concept measures, subjects give their own version of what they are like generally without specifying in whose presence such behaviors will most likely be expressed. The current study hypothesized that persons particularly sensitive to public aspects of their behavior (high public self-consciousness) would show greater discrimination in their self-reports when asked how they behave in the presence of a variety of different persons. Specifically, it was predicted that, compared to low public self-consciousness subjects, high-scoring subjects would show (a) greater variability in the ways they say they present themselves to different persons, and (b) greater discrepancy between their general self-concept and specific self-presentations. The subject first rated on a series of 20 adjectives how she generally is, and then using the same adjectives rated separately the way she is in the presence of five particular individuals who varied markedly in their role relationship to her.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 107 female students enrolled in introductory psychology. They received one hour research credit. A median split of the Public Self-Consciousness subscale (*Mdn* = 21) divided the sample into a high public group (*N* = 50) and low public group (*N* = 48). Nine subjects who scored at the median were deleted from the analysis.

Procedure

Subjects were tested in one of three large group sessions. Booklets were distributed containing the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975) and six ratings tasks. Prefaced by different instructions, these tasks required the subject to rate herself on 20 bipolar adjective items using a 7-point semantic differential. The 20 items were comprised of five four-item scales developed by Taylor, Lieb and Hogan (Note 1) to represent general personality factors identified by Norman (1963): extraversion (e.g., talkative/quiet), conscientiousness (e.g., dependable/carefree), likeability (e.g., tactful/blunt), emotional stability (e.g., anxious/relaxed), and culture (e.g., imaginative/down to earth). Two items on each scale were presented in reverse direction, and all 20 items were then randomly ordered.

The first rating task, a measure of the traditional self-concept, was the same for each subject; she simply rated "how you generally are" on the 20 items. The next five rating tasks were presented in a random order within the booklets. The subject first recorded the names of five particular individuals (mother, best same-sex friend, best opposite-sex friend, a person whom you dislike, and a professor whose course you are currently taking) at the top of each rating form. She was asked to recall past interactions with each stimulus person, and then to indicate using the 20 adjective items how she acted when in that person's presence.

Results

Variability Across Self-Presentations. For each of the 20 adjective items, a mean and standard deviation were computed on the subject's ratings across the five stimulus persons. The 20 standard deviations were summed for each subject to estimate her total variability. The average total variability for high public self-consciousness subjects (M = 27.92) was significantly higher than that for low public self-consciousness subjects (M = 24.05), t (96) = 2.38, $p < .05$. A similar analysis was performed based on the five factor scores instead of the

20 individual items. As expected, the high public group showed significantly greater variability (M = 5.51) compared to the low public group (M = 4.72), t (96) = 2.21, $p < .05$.

Discrepancy Between General Rating and Specific Self-Presentations. The analysis here was identical to the one above except that in computing the standard deviations across the five stimulus persons, the subject's general rating (from the first rating task) replaced the actual mean. Because the sum of squares is lowest when computed from the actual mean, the standard deviations computed from this less central value were substantially higher than the true deviations. High public subjects again showed greater discrepancy (M = 88.03) than low public subjects (M = 75.49), t (96) = 2.65, $p < .01$. An analysis based on factor scores yielded similar results, high public (M = 17.16) vs. low public (M = 14.49), t (96) = 2.60, $p < .01$.

For purposes of discriminant validity, it should be noted that high and low groups formed by median splits on private self-consciousness, social anxiety, and self-monitoring did not show any significant differences on the variability measures reported above.

Discussion

The results supported both predictions in that, compared with low public self-consciousness subjects, subjects especially concerned with how they appear to others showed (a) greater variability in how they present themselves across an array of different audiences, and (b) greater discrepancy between their general self-image and specific self-presentations. The logical next step is to determine if the audiences concur with the subject in rating how she presents herself. The current study supports the validity of the public self-consciousness construct by demonstrating significant effects on measures where the construct should theoretically be relevant, and by failing to find significant effects as a function of similar constructs that deal at least in part with the individual's sensitivity to social cues.

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